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1973

Mr. M.C. Pruitt

Becky Pruitt

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INTERVIEWED: Mr. M.C. Pruitt of Savannah. Mr. Pruitt is a white collar worker in his mid-forties.

INTERVIEWER: Becky Pruitt

Q: When did you come to Savannah? Or rather, when did your family come to Savannah?

A: My parents came to Savannah in 1926. I was two years old and really too young to remember. I do know that they moved here on my second birthday.

Q: Where did they move from?

A: They moved from Pendleson, South Carolina, however, I was born in Jasper County, South Carolina, and they moved to Pendleson and from there they moved to Savannah.

Q: Why did they decide to move to Savannah?

A: My daddy had secured a job with the AAA Fertilizer Company which was across the river at that time and he left that for some employment down on the wharf which was experiencing the boom of 1928-29, just immediately prior to the crash or Depression.

Q: What did he do at the wharf?

A: He originally was a contractor, a construction worker, building homes. He worked on the rebuilding of the wharf, he was a carpenter.

Q: Could you tell me about any aspects of the geography of Savannah that have changed since you were a boy?

A: My earliest recollections of Savannah is between the ages of two and three when we lived on State Street right behind the old Jewish Synagogue, I believe it was called the B'B' Jacob Synagogue. At any rate, I believe it was located on the corner of Montgomery and State and we lived on State and Jefferson. When I was about three years old, momma and Daddy moved out the county and we lived there until I was a teenager.

Q: What were the boundaries of the county at that time?

A: The city limits at that time took in what was known as Wagner Heights and across what is comparable to Bee Road now and across to Daffin Park and Waters Avenue and out that way and that was just about what was called the city limits in

those days. I'M talking about the early thirties now, you know, about thirty-two.

Q: I have heard that Victory Drive used to be considered a very rural part of the county as compared to the urban area of Savannah. Can you comment on this?

A: Yes, Victory Drive was a part of the old race track that went from Thunderbolt through Bonna Bella to Ferguson Avenue and from there to Bethesda to Montgomery Crossroads and from there back into Waters Avenue on in to Victory Drive down through Daffin Park and on back to Thunderbolt. And that was the original race track. Savannah had one of the first automobile race tracks in the country. And although I don't remember all the auto racing in the country, I do remember some of them. I remember the speed boat races down at Thunderbolt at the old Casino, where Tassoy's Pier is today.

Q: Anything else about Savannah that you miss?

A: Well, one of the biggest things I think I miss is the old street-car. I used to love to ride the trolley. I never have been one to ride the bus, I loved that street-car though. I remember street-cars that ran from Savannah to Isle of Hope to Thunderbolt and Bonna Bella and from Savannah to Milhaven out through the Union Bag area out Bay Street and to the Sugar Refinery out to Portwentworth. Then there was a street car that ran from downtown out to Daffin Park called the 40th Street run.

Q: They never ran a street-car to the beach did they?

A: No, but I remember the train that used to run to the beach. The train left from the foot of President Street where the Penn Waller Lumber Company is today. That was the Central of Georgia station and the depot at the beach was the pavillion, that burnt down. My dad had a job back then working on the pavillion and he would ride the train down to the beach and I remember one time he let me ride to the beach with him. It would stop in front of the old Ty-Breezer motel.

Q: Anything else?

A: Well, I remember the track that was laid for the old belt that ran from Broughton to West Broad down Liberty to East Broad and back to Broughton. That was before my time but I do remember walking long side the tracks when I was a boy.

Q: About the trolleys, how much did they cost?

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A: Well, I could ride for ten cents from Savannah to Thunderbolt at one time and then it went up to fifteen cents, as you would imagine. Far as other things around Savannah I remember a number of stores that no longer exist. For instance, one of the most prominent names in Savannah was that of the Pinkershan Cigar Stores. There was one on just about every corner of Broughton Street. They had a soda fountain and a big cigar, cigarette and tobacco corner and candies and in the one on Bull and Broughton there was a pressing unit where men could go in and take off their trousers and have the suit pressed while they waited in a stall. I've done that many a time when I was younger and thought of myself as a fancy fellow. I remember the old Bijou Theater that was across Congress Lane and Broughton Street and it was probably the largest show that Savannah had and I remember some of the vaudeville and burlesque shows that came here. Names like Miller and Whiteman and Harry James. There were a number of them that went on down to the beach to play at the Brass Rail. The river front was always the most fascinating thing in Savannah to me as a child. I used to hike down to the water and set down on the wharf and watch the ships come in, especially the sailing ships; one in particular was a three masted schooner that travelled from Portland, Oregon to Portland, Maine. At one time I had secured a job on it as a deck hand but my mother said no. I also remember the Southern Naval Stores resin yards down at the wharf. As a kid I jumped from barrel to barrel for a mile or so of nothing but resin.

Q: Was Savannah a very busy port?

A: Well, at one time it was the naval store center of the U. S. It set the prices for all other centers in the U.S. At one time it was the leading cotton exchange, too. These are things that Savannah has lost due to the changing of time. And there were other things of interest, like the people and all.

Q: Such as?

A: Such as things like Tin City and so on that bordered along the railroad tracks and the river. There were literally hundreds of homes where the Negro population lived. They built these homes out of tin and cardboard and wood or whatever. Some of them were no more than four by four. These were stuck back in among the mangrove and elderberry swamps along the Savannah River. I remember going in and hunting with them before they could afford guns so they would hunt with a stick and kill a rabbit with no more than a stick in their hands. Further up the river was a village called La Pageville which was built originally by the Central of

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Georgia Railroad, which incidentally, was for workers who worked on the line to the beach, and this was called LaPageville. I remember as a kid during the daytime I would stop by the village and drink water from the one and only pump that they had. It was located in the crossroads and at night we would slip back and listen to the people rant and chant and carry on like some sort of voodoo. They had their rituals of voodoo just like you would expect to find in some African village. You were afraid to get too close yet afraid to leave. You were entranced by it all. You wanted to hear wraactly what was going on. The chant was just really what you would expect to hear on a remake of an African movie. It was very real to all of them. Many of them I got to know by name as all the white boys of the neighborhood did and so we were not afraid to go by in the daytime but at night we were a little in awe. I remember as a youngster going to Fort Jackson which is now a National monument. It was covered with weeds and bushes and we would have to enter the fort by going into the river and swimming up through the dungeon.

Q: Fort Jackson is located down on President Street?

A: Well, on the Savannah River, but you go down President Street to get there today. I guess the most prominent colored person this community has seen was "Daddy Grace". He was the reputed spiritual leader of virtually all of the colored community here. Or so it seemed to the white people. I remember when he was due to come to Savannah on one of his speaking invites it was was hard to get the colored population to work. They wanted to take off because this was this leader and they followed him very closely and among all the domestic help you might as well forget them, they just refused to work. I remember, well, whether it was a cadillac or not- you know how it is to young boys- any big, big car was a Cadillac. And if I recall correctly it was a big black limosine of some sort, we all thought it was a cadillac. But I can remember him coming to town and he would drive down West Broad and the colored population would spread flowers and palms just like he was a messiah or something.

Q: How frequently did he come? Every week?

Q: No, just about every week but not every week. How regular or frequent I don't remember. I do know he came frequently because Savannah was his headquarters. He was, I believe, a native Savannahian. But when he did come he'd have his meetings and he said that he wanted "pretty young girls to take up the collections." He did this because he wanted the green stuff as he said. He had tremendous contributions from his followings. I'm not denying how much spiritual good he did, I don't know, but he sure got extremely wealthy.

Q: Do you have any specific recollections of political leaders in Savannah in your youth?

- A: Well, when I was coming up it seemed to me that there was only two politicians in the world and that was Franklin Roosevelt and Johnny Boen. I remember FDR coming to Savannah to campaign. He spoke at Grayson Stadium and my daddy, being a Southerner was a democrat and he carried me to the stadium and as a small child in '32 he put me on his shoulders to listen to the candidates speak. And if my recollections serves me right, Johnny Boen was the boss of Chatham County.
- Q: Was there a big political "machine" in Savannah?
- A: Well, only in the sense that Johnny Boen was the machine. I'm not critical of the man. I don't know much more than hearsay, because I was just a child. But like I said, it seemed that there were two politicians and that was FDR and Johnny Boen. Mrs. Boen is living today and I talked to her no more than two days and she is a beautiful person and I do know that Mr. Boen was not only a very successful politician but also a very successful lawyer so there is no criticism, I don't mean it in that sense, but only that he did seem to get to be the boss. I think every section of the country during the thirties had a political boss so we were no worse off than anyone else. There were many advantages to it. I don't mean political boss in any derogatory sense. I think that it is significant to mention that the only two politicians I knew were FDR and Johnny Boen. I think Savannah always has, if I may say so, for too long been a one party town and as in most southern towns a democratic stronghold, however, in the last few years, it's been evident to everyone that it's been split and the Republican Party has made more of an inroad, which I think is good, not that I am one or the other. I just think that it's healthy for a community to have two parties.
- Q: Getting back to Johnny Boen, was that around the time of Prohibition?
- A: Well, from Prohibition to the 1940's, I would say he was in control. And after the 40's Boen was considered to be boss.
- Q: Do you have any memories of Prohibition?
- A: I do not remember having seen any of it actually, but I did hear stories of it and the rum runners that came up the Savannah River to the Wilmington River and then up to Bonnaventure to the cemetery. There was an old casino there called Greenshich and this was where they unloaded

Q: Anything else?

A: I remember when I was young roaming around the woods particularly in the northeast section part of the county, I must've known the location of 50-75 stills and known their owners by name. Most of them were built on hammocks in the marsh and some of them I was welcome at and some I wasn't, depending on whose it was. If the owner thought I'd do some squealing they weren't crazy about us coming around. But some of them I got to know, as did the other white boys and they didn't bother us. Most were run by colored people.

Q: What's a landmark that you really miss?

A: Well, the demolition of the old citymarket was the worst thing that they've done yet. It was located on a square at Barnard, between Congress and Bryant. There's a Park and Shop garage there now. In the thirties, entrances to the inside were ramps that ran trucks or wagons in the early days to the inside. Farmers would display their wares. And they had meat markets, fish markets, fresh produce, even restaurants. And along the outside in the basement, there were shops and stores, but mostly vendors and fish markets, and such. I can remember one of Savannah's traditions, I don't know what to call it but a landmark, and that was the colored people that would take a two wheel wagon and load it up with oysters, shrimp and crab and vegetables and push them around the streets. I can hear the colored women now going along pushing a wagon and at the same time balancing a basket on their head and they would call out, "Crab by'er! Yer swimps, yeh sohta. Ay sohta, fish, swimps goin byer". It was just as sing-song and everyone in Savannah loved it but the health man put an end to it.

Q: Is that dialect called "gullah"?

A: Yes, that was "gullah" or "geechee". Both are Savannah dialects. In Carolina they use "Gullah" and in south Georgia they use "geechee". But here in Savannah we use both. But I think it was one of our greatest landmarks and we lost it.

Q: I know that Henry Ford was located around here. What, if any, kind of impact did he have on Savannah?

A: Oh, I think Henry Ford made a big impression here in Savannah. He was located at Richmond Hill which became almost an autonomous community in itself. In the late thirties he learned that my father was considered a fine carpenter and he came to the house and asked my father to work for him as his restor-

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ation foreman to restore the old plantation and equipment, like the cotton press and water mill and Daddy took the job with him and this was how I made Mr. Ford's acquaintance. I think he was one of the most impressive men I have ever met. He was very, very broad-minded. I remember there were times that he would come to Savannah and I'd go to the bank with him and he would stand in line like everyone else. He never expected special treatment or anything. I remember on many occasions when my father would let me go to work with him at Richmond Hill, Mr. Ford would engage me in conversation which impressed me as a youngster. On one occasion I put my foot in my mouth. He saw me sitting over on a log out the way and he came over and sat down by me and asked me a few questions such as what I wanted to be when I grew up and all. And finally, he asked me what kind of car I liked best, and I, without thinking, told him that honestly as a youngster that I preferred a Chevrolet. He got a big kick out of that. He wouldn't let me back down either. No, I liked a Chevrolet and I had to stick to it. He told me that he never would give me a Ford though.

Q: You mentioned earlier the polo grounds?

A: Yes, along the streetcar tracks that went to the Isle of Hope, the area that is now where Calvary Baptist Church and Medical Arts Shopping Center is today, this was the Savannah Polo Grounds. The grandstands were about where Columbus Drive is today. Not many people realize that Savannah had a very good polo team. As a matter of fact, I knew one of the players, I worked for his father. Lot of people don't realize that Savannah was first for a lot of things. Car racing, polo, speed boat racing, and a number of Savannah's dishes were original. Savannah was a big rice producing area and a lot of the dishes that include rice come from here. Lot of seafood recipes come from here too.

Q: You have been in the retail business in Savannah for quite a while, haven't you?

A: Yes, when the war was over and I got out of the Navy, I went to work for George Gillians at Photograph. I worked there for a number of years and then I went to work for Friedman Jewelers Company downtown. I worked there for many years and then went to work for J. P. Mewborn and eventually bought him out. I had my own business for ten years. Then I went into the trade that I'm into today.

Q: How has the retail business in Savannah changed over the past twenty years?



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- A: Well, besides the changing fads and fashions and that sort of thing I guess the greatest thing that has changed is the increased demand for consumer goods. When I first started out in the retail business people didn't have much money to spend or so it seems to me. Gifts were bought with much more care and deliberation.
- Q: Can you think of any specific changes as to the Savannah area?
- A: Well, as you must know, the downtown area has gotten bigger and more varied and all. Many more new merchants have come in and all. Years ago there were a few big business families that tended to dominate the retail business in Savannah but I think that that has changed to some extent now.
- Q: You mentioned that you had worked for Photograph. What did you do there?
- A: I was a developer. I really just did whatever they asked me to do. I took some pictures and all, but mostly I was to develop or enlarge or that sort of thing.
- Q: How did you get into the jewelry trade?
- A: Well, I needed a job and I knew someone who worked at Friedman's and so I went there and asked for a job.
- Q: Did you have any training as a watchmaker before you went to work there?
- A: Not really. I knew that I wanted to learn the trade so studied from a friend of mine but mainly I learned on the job.
- Q: What made you decide to go into business for yourself?
- A: Well, I guess that everyone thinks about being their own boss. I decided that if I could manage it that is what I wanted to do. Of course, when I first decided to by the business it wasn't as hard for the little man to make it. Later on the government really got down on small business and most of us didn't really have a chance. But I loved it. I almost made it but then circumstances just prevented it.
- Q: How big was your business?
- A: As small as they come. Just me. At first my wife helped but then she had to quit working so it was just me for about the first five years. Then things picked up and I hired one more person and we ran it for years just us two.

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- Q: Did or does Savannah have any sort of small businessmen's association?
- A: Small business association? No, nothing like that as such. Just the Merchants Association of the Savannah Chamber of Commerce. Savannah merchants never pull together. Look at this trouble today with the Broughton Street revitalization project. Those Broughton Street merchants should get together and decide what they think should be done and what they think would benefit the retail business downtown and present their proposals to the City Council.
- Q: Any speculation as to why Savannah merchants failed to unite back then, because, well, aren't they pretty well together on things today?
- A: Well, they are more together today than, say, ten years ago, but it could be better. As to why they weren't, well, I really couldn't say. I guess they just didn't see the advantages to it.
- Q: How tough was it running your own business?
- A: Sure, it was tough, but it was worth it. I really wanted to be my own boss. I had plans to start a sort of family business, you know? But there was just too much competition and not enough help from the people who could have helped.
- Q: When you were young, did you ever have any desire to live anywhere besides Savannah?
- A: Well, I suppose that if my family would have co-operated, I would have loved to live in the country. I really love the country and would have loved to grow up there but living in Savannah was a pleasant childhood. When I was a kid I never thought about living anywhere else. Home was where momma and daddy lived and none of us kids ever had the desire to leave home until we got older.
- Q: Well, after the war, was there ever a time that you thought about not returning to Savannah to live?
- A: No, I really didn't know what I wanted to do when I got out of the Navy, but I never hesitated about coming back to Savannah.
- Q: Ok, is there anything today that could make you leave Savannah or are you still as adamant about living here now as you were?

- A: Oh, I suppose that I have changed on that a lot. Yes, I would leave Savannah today. If I got a chance for a better job in another city, yes, I would move. Savannah will always be my home, but that's a very naive attitude, to say that you will never move away from your hometown. Savannah will always have the charm and beauty that I have always loved but I would be willing to move.
- Q: Do you think it would have been easier for you as a small businessman in a city larger than Savannah?
- A: Larger, no I don't think so. There would just be more competition. Now, maybe in a smaller town it would have been easier. Before Savannah got as big as it is today, I think the small businessman had it easier. For example, look at the small guys like Red Anderson or Solomon's Drugs; these guys used to be very well off.
- Q: What caused Savannah to grow as it did?
- A: Well, there were many things, I guess. You're really talking to the wrong person about that. The port, industries like Cyanamide or the Sugar Refinery or Union Bag. If you want to know some reasons as to why the retail business has grown in Savannah, then I can tell ya a little about that.
- Q: Ok. Why has the retail business business grown?
- A: For one thing, the increase in the tourist trade has helped tremendously. All those Yankees coming down from the north along the coast who go through Savannah are just great for Savannah's businessmen. The Chamber of Commerce has tried to help with that, by advertising. Also another thing that has been a boost to Savannah has been the development and growth of Hilton Head Island. I know that as far back as ten years ago, I got trade from some of these rich northerners who moved to Hilton Head. Savannah is the most convenient shopping location and it is large enough to offer what they want. And I guess another thing that helped Savannah was Hunter and the army and airforce.
- Q: Speaking about the retail business and all the things that have helped or hurt it, what affect, if any, did the racial trouble in the early sixties?
- A: They had quite an affect on Savannah. I know, I was right in the middle of it. It just virtually closed downtown Savannah down. Broughton Street was dead. I mean to tell you it just shut down. Anyway, the colored people were

demonstrating over at Morrison's Cafeteria on Johnson Square downtown. My store was in the Manger Hotel right on the other side of the square. Well, needless to say, business fell to a stop. And then there was some trouble and rock throwing and I had to spend about three days hold up in the store to prevent looters. It was the worst thing that I have ever seen. This is why I resent some of the things that the colored people do. Its not that I mind them having equal rights, I just don't like their methods. That summer ruined the whole year for me and many downtown merchants. I never recovered from the slump it put me in. I still had bill and rent and all to pay, but there erer no customers because people were afraid to come downtown. My store was in a bad location, right there in the center of it all and I suffered a lot of damages to top it all off.

Q: You sound rather bitter?

A: Well, I think anyone would be bitter if you had to watch something that you had worked for and put your life into, get ruined. I'm not saying that the riots are the cause behind my business going under, but it was a major reason. I literally suffered from that for the next four or or so years.

Q: You said that your store was in the Manger Hotel. That must have been interesting being located there?

A: Well, it was in that I got to meet a lot of interesting people who happened to come to or through Savannah. The hotel was very interesting. But, you know, after I moved to Broughton Street, still got to meet many people. Thats one reason I really love the retail business. You know, the Manger used to be one of Savannah's finer hotels not so very long ago. Of course it no longer exists today. But the Manger and the DeSoto were the top hotels. Now they are gone, just like so many other th ngs.